



**Betsy Gara
Executive Director
Connecticut Council of Small Towns
Before the
Planning & Development Committee
March 18, 2013**

RE: HB-6629 - AN ACT CONCERNING REGIONALISM IN CONNECTICUT

The Connecticut Council of Small Towns (COST) **opposes the provisions in HB-6629** which eliminate regional planning agencies and regional councils of elected officials and replace such agencies with eight regional councils of governments.

Under legislation adopted in last year's June Special Session, the Office of Policy and Management (OPM) is required to complete an analysis of the state's planning regions to redesignate boundaries and report to the General Assembly by January 2014. Under the Act, the analysis must consider a number of factors, including 1) opportunities for coordinated planning and the regional delivery of state and local services; 2) economic regions; 3) labor market areas and workforce investment regions; 4) relationships between urban, suburban, and rural areas, including central cities and areas outside of the state; 5) transportation corridors, connectivity, and boundaries, including metropolitan planning agency boundaries; and 6) current federal, state, and municipal service delivery regions, including emergency, health, transportation and human services regions.

HB-6629 ignores the process that was created to ensure that boundaries would be based on the consideration of these important factors. It also undermines the intent of the Act to provide municipalities and Regional Planning Organizations (RPOs) with sufficient time and opportunity to explore options to voluntarily merge.

The state's Regional Planning Organizations provide towns with a critical forum for discussing issues of inter-municipal concern, deciding on policy issues and directing various regional planning activities. As such, RPOs are a valued partner in addressing the needs of Connecticut's small towns and cities.

COST urges lawmakers to consider the following points in reviewing this proposal:

■ Forced Consolidation Would Undermine Regional Planning Efforts

HB-6629 would force consolidation of RPOs into 8 Councils of Governments without the input of the affected municipalities and the RPOs themselves. This would undermine the numerous projects undertaken by RPOs to serve their region, such as regional hazardous waste collection, transportation planning, municipal GIS parcel mapping and conservation and development.

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■ A State-Facilitated Process Must Fully Engage Municipalities and RPOs

COST opposes a state mandated process that will consolidate RPOs without the input of municipalities in the region. To ensure that municipal leaders are fully engaged as partners in any process to redesignate boundaries, we believe OPM should create a state-facilitated stakeholder process in the various regions to develop a plan that truly reflects the needs and priorities of the region. OPM should also be required to hold public hearings on any proposed consolidation to give local officials and residents the opportunity to weigh in on how the proposed changes may affect their community. In addition, to the extent possible, boundaries should be determined based on the consensus of the chief elected officials serviced by the region.

■ Demonstrate Benefits and Cost Savings of Proposed Consolidations

Many towns are questioning why consolidation is necessary because they believe the current boundaries serve their region and their community well. OPM should be required to demonstrate how boundary changes will affect regional planning and reduce costs before boundaries are mandated by legislation or state policy.

■ Provide Towns with Flexibility to Participate in RPO

Towns need the flexibility to participate in an RPO that they believe reflects the economic and social ties of their region. As such, towns should have the ability to opt-in or out of an RPO to ensure that they are participating in an RPO that best serves their region.

■ Support Regional Planning by Exploring Funding Mechanisms

The state should consider opportunities to enhance regional planning efforts by exploring funding mechanisms that may be used to support RPOs.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on concerns with HB-6629.

COST is an advocacy organization committed to giving small towns a strong voice in the legislative process. Its members are Connecticut towns with populations of less than 30,000. COST champions the major policy needs and concerns of Connecticut's suburban and rural towns.